

THE DOUBTFUL ISLAND

By Foxcroft Davis

THE yacht *Alceste*, white and virginal, dashed through the sapphire sea in the gold and silver of the moonlight. Everything about her was white, even her smokestacks and ventilators. Nothing sharper, cleaner or more graceful could be imagined than the lines of the *Alceste*, but her tonnage was over the two thousand mark, and she might have passed for the little sister of a third class cruiser. Her afterdeck was clear of cushions, rugs and hammocks as the quarterdeck of a war ship. She had indeed the aspect of a fighting ship on a holiday, and she could have given a good account of herself either in fighting or running.

Below in her great cabin, a splendid room thirty feet square, sat two men smoking and talking.

"Here," said Sir Kenneth Moncrieff to Warrington, the American newspaper correspondent, "is the record," handing him at the same time a manuscript. He had been sent out by a great New York daily to discover certain things concerning a mid-Pacific island about which strange and conflicting accounts had been given. By the exercise of superhuman tact and colossal audacity he found himself aboard the yacht of Sir Kenneth Moncrieff, the man more interested than any other human being in the doubtful island.

It was agreed between the two men, who had become fast friends, that Sir Kenneth should write in full the history of the island, and Warrington solemnly swore that he would respect the private part of the record in making up his newspaper story. Sir Kenneth Moncrieff, however, stipulated that in the event of his death the entire record should be deposited in triplicate with the naval authorities of the United States, France and Great Britain.

Warrington had the keen American face, the light blue, undaunted American eye and the sharp American voice. Sir Kenneth was the perfect picture of a beautiful Englishman, long, thin, flanked, blond, with a tawny leonine blondness, and with that icy self-control with which an Englishman can discuss coolly all the things that fire other men to madness. He smoked lazily while Warrington poured out the story as a pointer takes to his field work. He felt that his professional reputation would be made by the story, and the thought made his blood gallop. Sir Kenneth began reading the manuscript, which was in his own handwriting, singularly firm, without blot or erasure.

"In 1823 the ship *Selma*, of nine hundred tons, of Bristol, England, commanded by Captain Wright, from Singapore to Vera Cruz, reported that on February 21, in longitude 143 deg. 16 min., latitude 11 deg. 24 min., he sighted an uncharted island of approximately ten square miles. There was a bay with good anchorage, and the *Selma's* skipper, Captain Wright, went ashore and took possession of the island in the name of the British government. He planted a flagstaff and made a cairn of rocks, under which he buried a tin box containing a formal claim to the island, which he named *Selma Island*, after his ship and his wife. The island was remarkably beautiful and promising, but the vegetation was singular, and while there was some indication of volcanic origin in other ways this origin appeared to be flatly contradicted. Captain Wright, however, did not fully explore the island.

"His report was forwarded to the British Admiralty, and two years and a half later, in August, 1826, the British sloop of war *Diomedes*, Captain Moncrieff, then cruising in Pacific waters, was sent to take possession of the island.

"The *Diomedes* reached the spot indicated by Captain Wright and cruised over the whole ground for a month, but was totally unable to locate the island. Her commanding officer, Captain Moncrieff, on returning to Singapore, reported his failure to find the island to his flag officer, Admiral Knowlton. Captain Moncrieff's cruise had not been altogether satisfactory to the Admiral, who made some severe comments on this particular point of the failure to find the island.

"Feeling insulted by the Admiral's language, Captain Moncrieff got leave, returned to England, found Captain Wright and secured every detail from him concerning the island. Then Captain Moncrieff, who was a man of fortune, fitted out a bark and, putting Captain Wright in command, sailed in her himself as a passenger to the Pacific. While passing through the Indian Ocean Captain Wright suddenly developed a violent form of insanity with suicidal mania and succeeded in throwing himself overboard and was lost. Captain Moncrieff then took command of the vessel. The date given by Captain Wright was, however, complete and Captain Moncrieff had no difficulty in finding the island.

"He landed in January, 1830, and discovered it to be more beautiful and more extensive than Captain Wright had supposed. He also noted, as Captain Wright had done, the flora and fauna and temperature were unusual for that latitude. In the middle of the island was a conical elevation, which appeared to be a solitary peak. Captain Moncrieff climbed to the top, but instead of finding a plateau, as he expected, there was a great basin the size and shape of an extinct volcano.

"It must have been quenched, however, ages and ages ago, for trees and huge ferns grew, not only to the edge, but within the basin itself. The flagstaff left by Captain Wright was gone and also the tin box which he had buried under the cairn. In digging for this box, however, which Captain Moncrieff himself did, he found a lump of amber weighing something like fifteen pounds. There were also indications of amber in great profusion over the whole island and especially upon the shores of *Selma Bay*.

"As Captain Moncrieff was inspired solely by professional pride and the determination to set himself right with the Admiralty he said nothing about his discovery of amber to any one on board the bark. The wisdom of this was shown the next day, when Captain Moncrieff found at the other end of the island

which proved to be nearly twelve miles long, a French flag flying and a paper in an iron box lying at its foot in which the island was claimed for France by Captain Gaston, of the French brig *Celine*, of Boulogne. Captain Moncrieff, who happened to be alone when he discovered the French flag, removed it with the iron box. He had intended to remain at least a fortnight longer on the island and to explore it thoroughly, but he thought it best after this discovery, and knowing the value of the amber deposits, to return to England as speedily as possible. This he did, carrying with him the lump of amber. He made a long report to the Admiralty, giving exact geographic and topographic details, and presented the lump of amber to the Admiralty, asking that it might be sold for the benefit of Greenwich Hospital. This was done and the amber brought something like a thousand pounds.

"The affair was published not only in the service journals but in the popular press and excited much attention. Immediately, however, the Admiralty was informed by the French maritime authorities that the island had been discovered by Captain Gaston, of the French brig *Celine*, in October, 1829, who had taken formal possession of it in the name of France. The matter was not of much international consequence, but there was sharp correspondence between the naval and maritime authorities of Great Britain and France over the question. This was accentuated by the French government sending out a small frigate, the *Hirondelle*, to take formal possession of the island, which had been named by Captain Gaston *L'Isle Celine*. The similarity of names increased the confusion, and as Captain Wright was dead there was no explanation except by word of mouth of his having given it the name of *Selma*.

"Some months after the *Hirondelle* returned with the strange news that the island could not be found. The awkwardness of this situation of this situation

The Island Could Not Be Found. Captain Gaston was murdered by mutineers on his vessel. After this, by tacit agreement, neither the British nor the French maritime authorities took any further steps in the matter.

"The island was not heard of again until 1854, when an American merchant vessel, the *Jane*, of Marblehead, reported having spoken the American sloop of war *Albany* in Pacific waters. The *Jane*, being homeward bound, brought some letters, both official and private, from the *Albany* to the United States. One of these was a communication from the commander of the *Albany*, Captain Gerry, to the naval authorities at Washington, mentioning having found and explored an uncharted island in latitude 11 deg. 24 min., longitude 143 deg. 16 min., which he identified as the *Selma Island* of the British Admiralty and *L'Isle Celine* of the French Department of Marine. This was the last communication from the *Albany*, which it will be recalled, sailed from the United States in August, 1853, and mysteriously disappeared, her fate remaining unknown to this day.

"Meanwhile, almost immediately upon Captain Moncrieff's return to England from his voyage to the Pacific, he succeeded his father as tenth baronet, also inheriting a large estate, and retired from the navy. Soon after he became hopelessly invalided, but he survived more than forty years, dying, at the age of seventy-two, in 1874.

"He was a man of peculiar temper, but with a high sense of personal and professional honor. He was passionately fond of the navy, and conceived that his professional reputation, as well as his personal honor, had been cruelly wronged in the matter of the island's discovery.

"His elder son, also a naval officer, died some years before Captain Moncrieff, leaving an only son, Kenneth Moncrieff, a boy of fourteen at the time of his father's death. The boy lived with his grandfather, who never ceased to impress upon him that when he reached manhood he should make every effort to clear his grandfather's memory in this matter of *Selma Island*.

"Warrington paused for a moment and looked at Sir Kenneth, lying back in his long chair and watching the faint blue wreath of smoke from his cigarette. Not a quiver of an eyelid betrayed that the injection of Sir Kenneth's own personality into the story affected him in the least. Warrington, who inwardly marvelled at this, read on with clear emphasis the tragedy of Sir Kenneth's life, as Sir Kenneth himself were dead and gone like those souls now in the world of spirits whose earthly feet had trod the mysterious shores of the vanishing island.

"The boy, who succeeded to his grandfather's title and estates, early showed great fondness and aptitude for the sea. He became an enthusiastic yachtsman, belonging to most of the big yacht clubs in Great Britain, France and America. He determined to acquire experience in yachting before undertaking the rediscovery of the island. His warm friend and coadjutor in this noble sport was an old school and university comrade of his, Hugh Langton, and like Sir Kenneth Moncrieff, a man of large inherited fortune. The intimacy, which began at Harrow and continued through Oxford, was cemented by the similarity of tastes between the two men.

"Langton was reckoned by Sir Kenneth Moncrieff to be the soul of honor. He had great charm of manner, united with all the accomplishments of a man of the world. No thought of jealousy or rivalry between Langton and Sir Kenneth had ever arisen in Sir Kenneth's mind.

"Langton became almost as deeply interested in this matter of *Selma Island* as Sir Kenneth himself, and together the two friends made a number of experimental voyages in a large seagoing yacht, the *Alceste*, built on the Clyde for Sir Kenneth Moncrieff.

"At last in 1894 Sir Kenneth, accompanied by Langton, started upon his voyage of discovery, not mentioning, however, to any one except Langton what his ultimate object was. The yacht sailed by way of Suva, called at a number of ports and finally stopped at Singapore. There Sir Kenneth met for the first time the lady who, within two months, became his wife.

"This was Eleanor Chetwynd, the only and motherless child of Lieutenant General Chetwynd, who was on his way home to England before his retirement. She was a girl of singular beauty, with great masses of long golden hair, which she sometimes let fall about her like a veil. Her manners were fascinating, and both Sir Kenneth and Hugh Langton were much interested in her from the beginning. It made, however, no outward difference in their relations, although it became a matter of doubt as to which one the young lady favored. Soon after General Chetwynd's arrival at Singapore he grew ill and it was impossible for him to proceed to England. Within six weeks his death occurred.

"This brought matters to a crisis; Sir Kenneth Moncrieff proposed to Eleanor

elastic sailor, demanded that he should give her a riviere of diamonds if she should be the first one to see land.

"The *Alceste* and the *Siren* sailed in such close company that visits were often exchanged between the yachts, and on the night of June 16, 1895, Langton came aboard the *Alceste* to dinner and to remain the night. At that time every one on both yachts was expecting to sight the island at any moment. It was not, however, seen before sunset. After dinner Sir Kenneth and his wife and Langton went up on deck, where they remained until nearly midnight. A great moon blazed in the heavens, making the ocean almost as light as day. The beauty of the scene seemed to bewitch Sir Kenneth and his young wife and Langton, and they remained on deck talking with

trouble or delay.

"A great happiness had come to him unexpectedly in his marriage, and through what he supposed was Langton's generosity this happiness would in no way interfere with the object of Sir Kenneth's voyage. Langton showed a warm desire to assist Sir Kenneth in exploring the island, and it was arranged in order to save time that they should do alternate shifts of exploration lasting two days at a time. While Sir Kenneth was absent Langton stayed at the encampment with Lady Moncrieff, and when Sir Kenneth returned Langton would for a couple of days take up the work. Sir Kenneth was surprised, however, to find no amber along the coastline and no indications of it anywhere upon the island.

"The weather continued exquisitely beautiful, with cloudless days and starlit nights. Life in the tents, which were provided with every modern convenience, was luxurious. Lady Moncrieff was in the highest spirits, and her sympathy and pride in her husband's success added much to Sir Kenneth's happiness. He promised her that his gift of diamonds should be

even more costly than he had at first designed.

"Sir Kenneth would gladly have remained months on the island, but his work being finished within three weeks, he felt it a sacred duty to Captain Moncrieff's memory to return to England. Arrangements were made, therefore, that the tents should be struck and the return voyage begun on the morning of July 7, 1895.

"On the evening of the 6th of July dinner was served for the last time in their island home to Sir Kenneth Moncrieff and Lady Moncrieff and Langton. The scene was particularly impressive upon Sir Kenneth. The table, brilliant with lights and flowers, the menu prepared by the *Alceste's* chef, and Lady Moncrieff in a white evening gown looked seductively beautiful. All were in great spirits and rather more champagne was drunk than usual by the party, but there was nothing approaching drunkenness. After dinner Lady Moncrieff and the two men went out of doors and walked down upon the beach. There was no moon, but the sky was radiant with stars. Both yachts had steam up, and it was settled that the Moncrieffs and Langton should sleep on board their respective yachts that night.

"While standing upon the beach in the moonlight Lady Moncrieff did what Sir Kenneth had never known her to do before in the presence of a third person—she passed her arm around his neck, drew him to her breast, and kissed him. Langton looking on, Sir Kenneth was surprised and embarrassed at her action, and glancing toward Langton, saw an expression in his eye, not of amusement, but of menace. After that Sir Kenneth remembered nothing more until he found himself lying fully dressed in his berth on the *Alceste* in the midst of a convulsion of all the elements.

"He knew not whether it were day or night, whether he were awake or dreaming, or if it were time or eternity. Tremendous reverberations thudded from the sky and sea. The air was black and the *Alceste* trembled and plunged like a living thing in an agony of terror. Sir Kenneth managed to crawl upon the deck and the sight which met his eyes appalled him. The island was about five miles away and seemed now a great, glowing, red hot furnace, with masses of lava and flames that leaped almost to the low overhanging black sky. A furious wind seemed blowing from all quarters at once, and ashes, rocks and trees were being hurled in every direction miles outward upon the black ocean.

"The sea was violently agitated and huge gulls and mountainous waves were on every hand. The *Alceste* one moment tossed high upon the great green crested mountain of water, the next moment slid down into a black and seething abyss. At one moment her screw raced violently around, at another it was buried under tons of billows. Two of her water tight compartments were stove in, her upper works were a mass of wreckage, but still she floated like a log upon the convulsed ocean. The roaring and thundering came from the depths of the sea, and it seemed as if the floor of the ocean were being rent asunder.

"Suddenly between the *Alceste* and the gigantic roaring furnace of the island, which cast a red glare for twenty miles upon the black sky and sea, appeared what seemed to be the ghost of a vessel. It was the *Siren*, flung so close to the *Alceste* that it was as if some giant hand had hurled one yacht against the other. Both were completely helpless, and every soul on the *Alceste* waited for the moment when the two vessels should deal each other a mortal blow that would send them both to the bottom. A sudden chasm opened in the ocean into which the *Alceste* fell head foremost. The same gigantic convulsion changed the course of the

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